

General elections dominated the political landscape in 2014. The leftist Broad Front (Frente Amplio) coalition remained a majority in the parliament and their candidate, Tabaré Vázquez, returned to the presidency for a second (nonconsecutive) term.

A referendum on lowering the age of criminal responsibility was voted on at the same time as the legislative and presidential elections. While Uruguay still has a low crime rate compared to the rest of the region, security was a central theme in the presidential election. The referendum was rejected after passionate campaigning by both sides.

Uruguay made international news by its willingness to accept six detainees from the U.S. military prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, who had been cleared for transfer. While the transfer was agreed upon by both countries early in the year, the United States had delayed the process after the controversial Bowe Bergdahl transfer, and Uruguay subsequently put off the transfer until after the general elections. The six men arrived in Uruguay in December.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 40 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

The 1967 constitution established a bicameral General Assembly consisting of the 99-member Chamber of Representatives and the 30-member Senate, with all members directly elected for five-year terms. The president is directly elected for a single five-year term.

In the October 2014 elections, the Frente Amplio retained their majority in parliament, winning 50 seats in the lower house and 15 seats in the Senate. The National Party placed second with 32 and 10 seats in the respective houses, followed by Colorado with 13 and 4 seats; the remainder were taken by the Popular Assembly and the Independent Party. The Tabaré Vázquez–Raúl Sendic ticket, also of the Frente Amplio, captured the presidency after a run-off in November. Vázquez served as the country's first leftist president from 2005 to 2010; the constitution bans consecutive terms. Outgoing president José Mujica will return to the Senate after winning a seat in the October elections.

Under a 2009 quota law, women must comprise one-third of parties' candidate lists as of 2014. A campaign by women's groups supported these efforts during the year.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 16 / 16

Uruguay operates with an open and competitive multiparty system. The major political parties are the Colorado Party, the National Party (also known as Blanco), the Independent Party, and the Frente Amplio coalition, the latter of which is currently in power. Frente Amplio includes the Popular Participation Movement, the New Space Party, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the Uruguayan Assembly, among other factions.

The small Afro-Uruguayan minority, comprising approximately 8 percent of the population, is severely underrepresented in the government.

C. Functioning of Government: 12 / 12

Corruption levels in Uruguay are low compared to regional standards, and government institutions have established a fairly strong record of accountability to the electorate. The country's Transparency Law criminalizes a broad range of potential abuses of power by officeholders, including the laundering of funds related to public corruption cases. Uruguay was ranked 21 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index, making it one of the best performers in Latin America. However, Uruguay's regional governments lack transparency, in part due to limited online resources made available to the public.

Civil Liberties: 58 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 16 / 16

Constitutional guarantees regarding free expression are respected, and violations of press freedom are rare. The press is privately owned; the broadcast sector includes both commercial and public outlets. There are numerous daily and weekly newspapers, some of which are connected to political parties. A 2009 law eliminated criminal penalties for the defamation of public officials. The December 2014 passage of the Law of Audiovisual Communication Services (LSCA), commonly known as the Media Law, increased media pluralism by redistributing broadcast frequencies: one-third will go to community media, one-third to state media, and one-third to commercial stations. The law also established an independent Broadcasting Communication Council tasked with enforcing the law. It requires that at least 60 percent of public programming be produced or coproduced in Uruguay.

The government does not place restrictions on internet usage or monitor private online communications without proper legal permission.

Freedom of religion is broadly respected and a central tenet of the government's principles. However, there have been reports of anti-Semitic acts in recent years. In August, a swastika was keyed on the doors of an apartment building that has some Jewish residents.

The government does not restrict academic freedom.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

Rights to freedom of assembly and association are protected by law, and the government generally observes these in practice. A wide array of community organizations are active in civic life. For example, women's rights groups focus on problems such as violence against women, societal discrimination, and abortion rights. Workers exercise their right to join unions, bargain collectively, and hold strikes. Unions are well organized and politically powerful.

F. Rule of Law: 15 / 16

The judiciary is mostly independent, but the court system remains severely backlogged. More than 60 percent of the prison population consists of people awaiting pretrial hearings. Overcrowded prisons, poor conditions, and violence among inmates remain serious problems. The prison system still holds approximately 120 percent of its intended capacity, a decrease from previous years. Medical care for prisoners is substandard, and many rely on visitors for food. The recidivism rate is approximately 50 percent. Politicians debated methods for decreasing overpopulation in the prison system during the 2014 presidential campaign.

Uruguay's efforts to bring to justice those responsible for human rights violations committed under the military regime that ended in 1985 have been inconsistent and have taken steps backwards in recent years. Although a 2011 law enabled trials regardless of a prior amnesty law by saying that the statute of limitations that was the basis for the amnesty did not apply, the Supreme Court declared in 2013 that the 2011 law was unconstitutional. Nevertheless, most cases failed to move forward in 2014. A 2014 report by the UN special rapporteur on transitional justice urged Uruguay to proceed with these cases, but the judiciary has not responded.

Uruguay has historically been one of the most peaceful countries in the region. The homicide rate was only 7.5 per 100,000 people in 2014. However, officials have attributed a steady rise in crime over the past few years to warring drug gangs, with Uruguay becoming an increasingly important transit point for narcotics. The outgoing Mujica administration's response included an increased police presence in the capital, especially during periods of high tourist activity, as well as a bill to legalize and regulate the production and distribution of marijuana, which prompted the rollout of a legal marijuana marketplace in May 2014. In addition, the "Seven Zones Plan," which began implementation in 2013, expanded social programs and law enforcement measures in the poorest districts of Montevideo, where the majority of crime is concentrated. A bill passed in August 2014 increased gun control laws, including higher penalties for trafficking and possession of weapons, regulations for the sale of arms, and requiring the destruction of confiscated weapons. Gun ownership rates are unusually high at 31.8 per 100 people, the ninth highest rate in the world.

The Afro-Uruguayan minority continues to face economic and social inequalities. An affirmative action law to improve conditions was passed in 2013, including incentives to increase graduation rates and an 8-percent quota in government employment, but implementation remains slow.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 15 / 16

Women enjoy equal rights under the law but face discriminatory traditional attitudes and practices, including salaries averaging approximately half those of men for comparable jobs. Violence against women remains a problem, with the government reporting that 7 out of 10 Uruguayan women suffer some kind of violence. Women hold 16 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Representatives and 29 percent in the Senate. Women make up approximately 25 percent of Uruguay's armed forces, compared to an average of 4 percent in Latin America overall.

The parliament approved same-sex civil unions in 2007, legalized abortion for any reason during the first trimester in 2012, and voted overwhelmingly to legalize gay marriage in 2013. Uruguay was the first country in the world to ratify the Domestic Workers Convention, in 2012. The convention mandates domestic workers' core labor rights.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)